

Updating Tradition: Necessary Changes to Marine Corps Recruit Training

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THE MARINE CORPS CREED (THE RIFLEMAN'S CREED)

This is my rifle; there are many like it but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. My rifle without me is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will...My rifle and myself know that what counts in war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit...My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its strengths, its weaknesses, its parts, its accessories, its sights, and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will...Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders for my country. We are the masters of my enemy. We are the saviors of my life. So be it, until there is no enemy, but peace. Amen!

EVERY MARINE IS A RIFLEMAN

Warfare has never adapted to the traditions of a fighting force. Survival necessitates that forces adapt to the changes in warfare. In 1999, General Krulak added the concept of *Strategic Corporal* to the Marine lexicon. Seven years after the concept was introduced, outdated drill movements are still practiced. Field skills and tactical formations are neglected and the Crucible has lost its place as the culminating event of recruit training. The recruit depot impresses upon recruits that decision-making skills and critical thinking are subordinate to rote memorization. However, the modern battlefield requires mental as well as physical agility in all ranks. It is no longer enough for every Marine to be a rifleman. In Afghanistan and Iraq a new primary weapon, the rifleman's mind, has replaced the M16. To prepare Marines to fill the role of *Strategic Corporal*, recruit training must shift its focus from drill, re-evaluate and reposition the Crucible, and restructure small-unit leadership training.

DEPOT PRODUCT VS FLEET REQUIREMENT

Over the course of twelve weeks, a recruit must learn to drill, fire a rifle, learn basic field skills, learn Marine Corps history, conduct basic first aid, pass swim qualification, and earn a tan belt in MCMAP. With so much to learn in such a short period, certain subjects are given priority.

Unfortunately, what is currently considered priority at the depot does not contribute to the development of a *Strategic Corporal*. The definition of a basically trained Marine needs to be reevaluated. Those new expectations should reflect the needs of the current operating environment.

An August 2005 NCO lessons learned conference discussed shortcomings of new Marines arriving to the fleet. The conference after action stated,

Nearly all of the infantry NCOs expressed the opinion that infantrymen reporting to operational units from the School of Infantry (SOI) had not adequately retained the skills introduced during instruction. They believe there should be more repetition of infantry skills with Marines demonstrating mastery of basic skills before leaving SOI.¹

Discussion often focused on the realities of fighting a dynamic, evolving enemy. The NCOs voiced that "too much emphasis [is placed] on standard operating procedures (SOPs) when flexibility and innovation are required to counter a thinking, imaginative enemy who adapts quickly to our changes in tactics, techniques, and procedures."² The Marine Corps needs to evolve by changing how it teaches field skills during recruit training and by preparing each individual Marine to think and act outside "the playbook."³ In order to accomplish this task the Marine Corps must reevaluate the scope and focus of its recruit training.

¹ The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *Report on Non-Commissioned Officers Lessons Learned Conference 9-10 August 2005*, 6.

² The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, 11.

³ The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned.

The Standing Operating Procedures for Recruit Training defines the scope of its mission as "producing basic Marines who function effectively in garrison, are trained in rudimentary individual field and combat skills, and practice those personal and professional traits which distinguish them as Marines."⁴ Simply stated, over the course of twelve weeks a drill instructor must de-civilianize his recruits, teach them how to function as Marines, and give them a basic understanding of how to fight as Marines. Filled with required events, the typical training day is completely scripted. On the rare occasions a drill instructor has free time with his platoon, he conducts remediation on tested information. Opportunities for remediation of field skills are rare and time to teach outside the program of instruction (POI) is rarer still. If change is to occur, it must occur in the POI.

The sterile environment of recruit training does not allow above and beyond training for recruits. Platoons have hallmarks to meet that evaluate the success of transforming recruits into Marines. If the Marine Corps desires a subject to be learned to the point of rote memorization, then that subject is formally tested. However, the results are counterproductive. On graduation day, one may ask any recruit what the general orders are and he will confidently recite all eleven. Ask that same

⁴ Depot Order P1510.30L, *Standing Operating Procedures for Recruit Training* (San Diego, April 30 2002), 1-3.

recruit to give an example where each order would apply and he would be completely perplexed. The Depot standard of memorizing and regurgitating knowledge does not necessitate an understanding of practical application. If recruits cannot apply memorized information, then the act of memorization does not serve its intended purpose. There needs to be a synthesis between memorization and application. The standard and the testing method need to change.

To implement changes to the POI without extending recruit training the Marine Corps needs to eliminate anachronistic practices that are no longer essential in molding a modern warrior. Changes to practices that are embedded in tradition are often painful. Yet, some traditions are no longer relevant in the training of a *Strategic Corporal*. One such practice is that of close-order drill.

DRILL, DRILL, DRILL!!

The *Standard Operating Procedure for Recruit Training* states that close-order drill "develops instantaneous and willing obedience to orders, a high state of discipline, confidence, respect for authority, teamwork, and unit esprit."⁵ Since the Prussian Army commissioned the *Drill Regulations of the Infantry* in 1888, the world's militaries have conducted close-order drill at the small-unit level. The 1888 manual

⁵ SOP for Recruit Training, 12-9.

prepared a lower level unit commander to conduct close-order drill autonomously in a *tactical situation*.⁶ In December 1916, the German Army replaced the tactics portion of the *Drill Regulations of 1906* (similar to the regulations of 1888) with *The Training Manual for Foot Troops in War*. In *Stormtroop Tactics*, Bruce Gudmundsson explains that the manual "contained, for the first time, the beginnings of official recognition that the column and skirmish line tactics [*open-order drill*]...were unsuited for trench warfare...Official recognition of this fact...meant an improvement in the training of recruits"⁷. Today the Marine Corps finds itself in a parallel situation. Recognizing the complexities of the modern battlefield and the effects a rifleman can have on multiple levels of warfare (tactical, operational, and strategic); the Marine Corps must mirror the brilliance of the German Army of 1916. In the words of SgtMaj Spadaro of First Recruit Training Battalion, San Diego, "brilliance in the basics is a cornerstone of effective entry level training - there is merit in repetitive, behavioral conditioning (tempered with discipline and obedience), training - however, we need to look forward and adjust our training syllabi to confront the future battlefield of tomorrow."⁸

⁶ LTC Tan Kim Seng, "The Need for a Leadership Culture and Initiative for Manoeuvre Warfare," *Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces* V26 (April-June 2000): 53.

⁷ Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics* (Praeger Publishers, New York: 1989), 86.

⁸ Spadaro.

Drill is an essential piece of recruit training, but it should not be overemphasized to the detriment of contemporary military skills. Upon graduation, a new Marine can methodically explain the intricacies of complicated drill movements like *stack arms* or *column of files*. Proficiency in drill is commendable, but detailed knowledge of these drill movements comes at a price. Combined, these two movements take up at least twenty hours of instruction and remediation time.⁹ In contrast, the majority of new Marines cannot recall a single combat formation. Taught during a forty-five minute period of instruction followed by a two-and-a-half hour practical application exercise, formations like the *squad wedge* are faint memories.¹⁰ Upon graduation, Marines never again conduct *stack arms* or *column of files*, but they do execute combat formations (of some fashion) every time they fight or train to fight. The disproportionate amount of time spent on close-order drill prepares a *Strategic Corporal* for the battlefield of the 19th century rather than that of the 21st.

⁹ Sgt Maj Anthony Spadaro, "Answers-Finally!!," 15 December 2005. personal e-mail (15 December 2005). Sgt Maj Spadaro is currently the Sgt Maj for 1st Bn, Recruit Training Regiment, MCRD San Diego. He has served as a drill instructor, Senior Drill Instructor, Chief Drill Instructor, Company 1stSgt for a recruit company, and as an instructor at DI School. His e-mail was a reply to questions I had asked about the training regiment, specifically: "How long does the average platoon spend practicing stack arms/column of files? How long does the average platoon spend on refining field skills? How long does the average platoon spend preparing for final drill? What drill movements are only practiced at the depot other than stack arms/column of files? What is the current interior guard package at the depot? How prepared are our new Marines for operations in Iraq (any MOS)? Ideas/input for changing the Crucible? Any other relevant questions that you believe I have missed?" Sgt Maj Spadaro conducted informal interviews with (in his own words) "numerous Marines with extensive "8511" time (from Sgt'sMaj - to 1stSgt's to prior's, to serving 8511's). Statistically, I queried the whole of the 8511 population. Further, I solicited comments from SOI personnel."

¹⁰ Recruit Training Schedule (San Diego, RTR S-3, August 2005) Field Week, Training Day 37.

Drill is not as important as relevant training. Recruits are training for war, yet the only subjects during recruit training not formally tested are field and combat skills.¹¹ Fifty-three hours are dedicated to drill in the recruit training schedule and more than one hundred hours are used for remediation of drill.¹² One hundred hours of drill remediation comprises 70% of the time allotted to conduct remediation on all subjects.

By changing the training focus from 19th century drill to current combat formations and practices, the depots could better prepare new Marines for SOI training and fleet employment. Relieving SOI of the burden of re-teaching basic skills allows for more time at SOI spent on remediation and advanced skills. Additional training at SOI would accelerate a Marines preparation to fill the role of *Strategic Corporal*. Incorporating squad formations and hand-and-arm signals into final drill while removing unnecessary movements such as *column of files* would ensure that tactical formations be memorized and practiced to perfection. The longer the Marine Corps retains

¹¹ SOP for Recruit Training, 4-3 to 4-4. Graduation requirements for recruit training are listed as:

- a. Service Rifle Qualification
- b. PFT (135 or above)
- c. Battalion Commander's inspection.
- d. Water Survival Qualification (CWS4 or Better)
- e. Attain an overall score of at least 80% on practical and written exams.
- f. The Crucible.

¹² Spadaro.

drill-centric indoctrination training, the more backwards and outdated the recruit training process becomes.

THE CRUCIBLE

The Crucible is suffering from an identity crisis. It was designed to be the "capstone experience for the inculcation and validation of the core values instruction," and as the culmination of recruit training.¹³ In order to pass the Crucible, a recruit must demonstrate Marine Corps core values in his actions throughout the event. Teamwork, intestinal fortitude, and a will to persevere are measures of success during the Crucible. Based on intangibles, the desired results of the Crucible are themselves immeasurable; a greater sense of pride and belonging, an understanding of warrior traits, and a commitment to others. To achieve its desired results, the Crucible relies as much upon the emotion of the event as it does on the difficulty of the training. In its current state, however, the Crucible does not accomplish its intended purpose. Originally, the Crucible occurred during the final days of training. At the conclusion of the Crucible, a dramatic ceremony was held. At the ceremony, the recruit received his

¹³ SOP for Recruit Training, 8-6 to 8-7. The complete list of objectives are:

- a. To serve as a capstone experience for the inculcation and validation of the core values instruction presented throughout recruit training.
- b. To further develop the esprit de corps that comes of shared hardships and shared accomplishments.
- c. To cultivate the concepts of teamwork, team building, and commitment to others.
- d. To assist recruits in a true understanding and demonstration of the Core Values and Warrior traits necessary of a Marine.
- e. To introduce the recruits to the relationship between a Marine squad and its NCO leaders (as distinct from the recruit to drill instructor relationship they are accustomed to and must transition from).

Eagle, Globe, and Anchor from his drill instructor and officially earned the title, Marine. However, the Crucible now occurs several weeks prior to graduation.¹⁴ The Crucible was shifted in the schedule due to the physicality of the event; high rates of injuries are typical at the end of the Crucible. The Crucible was moved to allow healing time between the Crucible and graduation, lowering the number of new Marines held in a medical rehabilitation platoon. Due to its earlier placement in the schedule the emotion of the event has been lost. To a recruit, the Crucible is nothing more than an obstacle before another two-to-four weeks of training.

The earlier timetable also lessens the role of the drill instructors. A major aspect of the Crucible at its inception was the focus on handing down tradition and knowledge from one generation of Marine (the drill instructor) to a younger generation of Marine (the recruit). Considering several weeks of training are still ahead, a drill instructor does not have the privilege of truly letting down his guard during the Crucible. As a result, the core-values focus of the Crucible depends exclusively upon physical adversity instead of a bond between generations of Marines. The Crucible, in effect, has become nothing more than a difficult field evolution.

¹⁴ The Crucible is conducted during week eight at MCRD San Diego and week ten at MCRD Parris Island.

The Crucible does retain some of its initial value. From a training standpoint, the free play conducted at pre-planned stations makes the Crucible the single most important training event during recruit training. It is the only event during recruit training in which recruits make decisions without the assistance of drill instructors. It is the only time during recruit training that recruits' focus specifically on honing their decision-making skills. Unfortunately, the Crucible is threatened with being replaced by a second field week. Concern over injuries and a general lack of interest threaten the Crucible with extinction. The Crucible must be moved to the end of the training schedule in order to survive and be "the culminating event at recruit training."¹⁵ The intangibles gained by a properly timed Crucible are worth the burden of maintaining a rehabilitation platoon for graduated Marines.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

General Krulak wrote, "In many cases, the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well.

¹⁵ Series Commander Speech (RTR S-3, MCRD San Diego). On the day recruits are "welcomed" into their companies the festivities begin with pre-written memorized speeches given by the Company Commander, Series Commander, Senior Drill instructor and "Heavy" or "J" Drill instructor. One part of the Series Commander Speech states "Along the way you will be trained and evaluated in military knowledge, martial arts, close-order drill, physical fitness, water survival, marksmanship, culminating in our defining moment The Crucible. I can assure you at the end of the Crucible you will feel a greater sense of pride and belonging than you have ever experienced before." Because of The Crucible's movement in the training schedule, most Series Commanders change the wording of these two sentences.

His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation; and he will become-- the *Strategic Corporal*.”¹⁶ After graduating from recruit training, the average new Marine has between twelve and twenty-four months before he is promoted to corporal. With so little time between graduation and becoming an NCO, a Marine needs to begin training as a decision maker as early as possible. Recent events, like Abu Ghraib, prove that military personnel of all ranks must be able to see beyond their pay grade and understand the possible ramifications of their decisions. Considering the weight of a recruit’s future burden, the Marine Corps poorly prepares him to lead or make decisions upon initially entering the fleet.

A recruit’s leadership training is based on the drill instructor’s leadership.¹⁷ However, unless the recruit is billeted as a squad leader or platoon guide, he has little opportunity to refine his own leadership or decision-making ability. Unfortunately, the week allotted for small unit leadership is poorly contrived.¹⁸

Small-unit leadership week is under utilized. During the day, recruits are assigned to supporting agencies around the

¹⁶ Gen Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” Marine Magazine (January, 1999).

¹⁷ SOP for Recruit Training, 3-5.

¹⁸ Small-unit leadership is conducted during week 10 at MCRD San Diego (post-Crucible) and week 4 at MCRD Parris Island (Pre-Crucible).

depot to conduct "small-unit leadership training."¹⁹ Small-unit leadership is conducted in the form of working parties, directing traffic, answering phones, and making copies. The portion of the Recruit SOP that lists gardening tools that recruits can and cannot use applies specifically to small-unit leadership week.²⁰ Mowing lawns and trimming hedges are poor substitutes for actual leadership training. However, when small-unit leadership week was adopted, an event focused on decision-making was incorporated.

During the evenings of small-unit leadership week, companies conduct an interior guard package. Many companies send their recruits to walk in circles around a post for two hours at right-shoulder arms. This practice is preferred because a recruit is accomplishing two tasks at once: drill and interior guard. Oddly enough, the only post guarded at right-shoulder arms is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the Army guards that post.

At no other point in training, at either the depots or at SOI, does a Marine receive training in interior guard. The Interior Guard package is a missed opportunity to prepare

¹⁹ Recruit Training Schedule, Week 10.

²⁰ SOP for Recruit Training, 7-5 to 7-6. The actual list is as follows:

- a. non-riding lawn mowers
- b. engine powered hedgers and trimmers
- c. compactors
- d. vacuum cleaners
- e. floor polishers

recruit's for the current operational environment. The construct of an interior guard force²¹ mirrors the tasks and schedule of units operating in Iraq. By providing classes on interior guard, briefing a simple five-paragraph order, implementing log books, establishing a react force, publishing ROEs, using scenarios with role players, and conducting debriefs, the interior guard package has the potential to become an excellent small-unit leadership exercise. Free play during the exercise would allow recruits to refine their decision-making skills and operate under the stress induced by being in command rather than being commanded. The exercise would also focus on challenging those recruits that have not typically held the key billets in the platoon. Instead of squad leaders and platoon guides making decisions, the exercise targets the sentries and supernumeraries.

Instead of menial tasks and poor training, small-unit leadership week needs to focus on leadership. As it is now, small-unit leadership week lacks substance and purpose, but it has the potential to be one of the most significant events during the twelve-week cycle. The ability to observe recruits acting independently prior to graduation allows the drill instructor to measure the success of his instruction. The

²¹ The typical construct for an interior guard force comprises of three elements, a platoon on rest, platoon on react, and a platoon on post. This construct is similar to companies force structure in Iraq; platoon on patrol, platoon on post (perimeter), platoon on rest, and a platoon acting as the quick reaction force.

result desired at the end of small-unit leadership week is that recruit's transition from a recruit mindset to a Marine mindset. The difference between the two mindsets being; a recruit does what is right because he is told to do so, a Marine does what is right because he understands the difference between right and wrong.

EVERY MARINE IS A STRATEGIC CORPORAL

At no point in a Marine's career is he more impressionable than as a recruit. Young Marines must be imbued with a desire for initiative and action. Self-discipline and measured actions of the Marine Corps corporals and lance corporals win engagements in Iraq. Close-order drill is no longer the only tool available for indoctrinating a recruit into the military culture. Excellence in tactical formations and field skills can have the same desired results as close order but with additional benefits. Those combat skills, rehearsed with the same intensity as close-order drill, can be reinforced during free play exercises conducted during the Crucible and small-unit leadership training. Further free play during the interior guard exercise would reinforce the importance of the Eleven General Orders while providing a sound understanding of the construct of an interior guard force. Such additions and changes to recruit training would dramatically alter a new Marine's perspective of his role in the fleet. As it is now, a

new Marine who graduates from recruit training believes that without his rifle he is useless. In the near future, it is imperative that a new Marine understands that the use of his rifle is superseded by the use of his mind.

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